

**October 1, 2010**

***“Echoes of the Heart”***

*Reflections on Life and Community Living*

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**The power of personal presence.** What do you do when the loved one of a friend or an acquaintance dies? How do you respond? What do you do or say?

A few days back, young woman was telling me about a close friend who, in the last three months, had lost both parents. The young woman had already called her friend, who lives in New Orleans, and left a message. Still, should she call her again? What should she do?

Particularly, when a young person dies or when there are *tragic* elements surrounding a death, what do you do, and what do you say? As a pastor active in *grief ministry*, I am asked these sorts of questions all the time.

My response, generally, is threefold: to begin with, *do* something. Secondly, whatever you do, respond from the heart, from deep down, which takes focus and energy. And lastly, in case you're worried about it, words are *not* that important. What *is* important are *presence* and the compassion that *presence* brings; which means, *being there*, as best you can, in some caring way.

Often times, in these difficult situations, we think we have to say something; and, understandably, we worry that it might be awkward or we might mess it up. I'm not suggesting that we *not* say anything. There are usually some helpful words we can share if we wish. However, what I am saying is that our words are *not* the most important thing. The most important thing is *being there*.

I love the story about a group of four to eight year-olds who were asked to respond to the question, *What does love mean?* One of the best responses came from a four year-old little boy whose elderly next door neighbor had just lost his wife.

One day, upon seeing the man crying, the little boy went into the old gentleman's yard, climbed onto his lap and just sat there.

Later, when his mother asked him what he had said to the neighbor, the little boy said,

*Oh, nothing,, mommy, I just helped him cry.*

How precious! And what a perfect response, as well.

**Prayer as presence.** When a person is hurting; when they are sick, bereaved or vulnerable in whatever way, the most powerful and loving thing we can do is to be *present* to them in some sincere way. Actually *being there* speaks volumes.

Personally, I believe in prayer as *presence*. We don't have to say anything. Prayer is our effort to make a connection with God. God knows what's in our hearts. Simply *being* there with a heart-felt hug or pat on the back means everything. Why, because we are fundamentally social beings. As social beings, we thrive on the personal touch; indeed, we *need* the personal touch. The words are secondary.

What is so important in many situations in life—particularly with our children and our families—is *personal presence*. Most of us know that, which is why when our children are participating in sporting events or in the arts, we do our best to attend their games—their soccer games or tennis matches, their recitals and other performances.

That is why when we see boys and girls, young men and women, reflecting back on their lives about how their parents—or parent—were absent, it is so sad. It's sad because it means so much. More than material gifts, more than words of praise, our *presence* is the most powerful gift we can give our children.

For all of us, in reflecting on our lives, there are places where we need to be—to be a *presence*. It may be a graduation or a special anniversary; it may be a baptism or a wedding or a Memorial Service. All the time in our lives, there are places where we need to be.

A three year-old little girl and her grandmother were studying a plastic model of the human heart. They located all the chambers and arteries. When they were finished, the little girl asked, innocently, *but grandma, where's the love?*

Where's the love, indeed? The love is in our *personal presence*.